

Church Pews Part 1 Continued

3. We read about 'renting' pews in the pre-20th century life of the church. Did any such practice of pew rental or 'family pews' form part of the life of any of our Carpenter Gothic churches in the Diocese of Florida?

The practice of renting pews to families constituted a significant source of church revenue until it ended during the first decades of the 19th century. To secure a pew, a family paid an initial fee. Afterward, the family also paid a yearly assessment and a weekly contribution. Having acquired the pew, which in that era would have been a "box pew," the family could personalize it with furnishings and decorations, including chairs, padded benches and wallpaper.

When Captain Henry Bond and his wife, Jane Lefferts Lloyd Bond (who was later to become the founder of St. Clement's, Lloyd, now St. Clement's Chapel of the Church of the Advent, Tallahassee (1895)), pledged \$200 to the construction fund at St. John's, Tallahassee, their donation entitled them to a reserved pew when the parish completed its new Greek Revival church in 1838 (which burned in 1879).

But by the time the earliest Carpenter Gothic Episcopal churches were built, starting in the mid-1800s, pew rentals were coming to an end. My great-grandfather, the Reverend Arthur John Rich, the first headmaster of the Hannah More Academy in Reisterstown, Maryland, spearheaded a campaign in the early 1850s to build a Carpenter Gothic chapel, St. Michael's, on the school's grounds. As he talked with prospective donors, he had to warn them that they could not expect any preferential seating: it was to be a "free church" in the new manner, without closed pews or pew rents.

In Florida, too, the pew-rental era had drawn to a close. There is no record I've uncovered of pew rentals at any of the 39 churches profiled in *Spires in the Sun*.

4. How about 'box pews'? What is a box pew and are there any in our Diocese or formerly in the history of our Florida churches?

A box pew is a type of church pew enclosed by a rectangle of wooden walls up to five feet high and fitted with hinged doors for entry and exit. Such pews were usually arranged centrally in the nave, with side aisles but no central aisle. This form of church seating was common in England and other Protestant countries between the 16th and early 19th centuries.

Box pews were prevalent in churches in Colonial and early 19th century America, too. From 1790 through the 1820s, Anglican churches were built in the late Georgian or federal style, like Abingdon Episcopal Church, White Marsh, VA (1755). After that, most were constructed in the Classical Revival style, like St. Michael's, Charleston, SC (1761). On the interior, both styles were chiefly auditory in their emphasis: boxy, white and bright, with clear glass

windows, and devoid of any trace of Gothic shadow or mystery. Liturgically, they centered around a high pulpit with a sounding board, flanked by a small holy table, font, and rail. Worshipers were supposed to see and hear their priest. In the nave, the seating was compartmentalized into box pews.

Box pews were not designed for exclusivity or privacy but for warmth. In that era, church interiors were not yet heated with stoves. Thus, families would bring portable foot warmers with them to church. Made of perforated metal, these devices contained coals or heated bricks. They were set on the floor of a box pew, often under footstools. Family members encased themselves in cloaks and blankets from their shoulders down to the footstools, trapping the heat. The pew's walls reflected the heat and obstructed any drafts.

In Florida, several extant Episcopal churches, including Trinity, St. Augustine (1831), Old Christ Church, Pensacola (1832), and Trinity (originally known as Christ Church), Appalachicola (1838), are old enough to have originally had box pews. It is known that the Pensacola church had doors on its original pews. Judging from an early photograph, the Appalachicola church, too, had box pews. The Carpenter Gothic churches, however, were built later in the century, after box pews had gone out of style. The oldest Carpenter Gothic Episcopal church in Florida, St. Mark's, Palatka, was raised in 1855. Thus, it is highly unlikely that any of the Carpenter Gothic churches had box pews, even in their earliest days. Carpenter Gothic churches in Florida were heated in winter by cast-iron stoves, the smoke from which was piped away into a brick chimney built onto the church. With the advent of HVAC, most of the surviving churches have had their chimneys removed, but some, such as St. Mary's, Palatka (1883) and St. Margaret's, Hibernia (1875), still have them.